

USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

DEMOCRACY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
<p>Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.</p>					
1. REPORT DATE 15 MAR 2006		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2005 to 00-00-2006	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Democracy in the Middle East				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S) Abdelfattah El Sisi				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, Carlisle, PA, 17013-5050				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Distribution authorized to US Government agencies only; Administrative or Operational Use; 15-03-2006; U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, Carlisle, PA, 17013-5050.					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT See attached.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT 1	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 18	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

ABSTRACT

AUTHOR: BG Abdelfattah Said EISisi
TITLE: Democracy in the Middle East
FORMAT: Strategy Research Project
DATE: 15 March 2006 **WORD COUNT:** 5127 **PAGES:** 17
KEY TERMS: Middle East, Democracy, Strategic Vision
CLASSIFICATION: Unclassified

This paper addresses the impact of democratizing the Middle East. It will assess the current strategic and political conditions in the Middle East and will highlight the challenge, the risks and the advantages provided by a democratic form of government. Areas addressed will include: differing perspectives between the Middle Eastern and Western cultures; impacts of poverty, lack education, and religion; lack of strategic vision; psychological nature of the people and the government; and, inherent risks of new democracies. The paper will conclude by addressing the future of democracy in the Middle East.

DEMOCRACY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The Middle East region is considered one of the important critical regions in the world. The Middle East region is the birth place of major religions, including Islam, Christian and Jewish religions. The effect of the religious nature of the environment is evident in the culture of Middle Eastern people and is one of the most important factors that affect the politics of the region. Because of the nature of the Middle Eastern culture, one must take into account the religious nature of the people when conducting diplomatic negotiations and establishing policy. From an economic perspective, the Middle East is blessed with huge oil and natural gas reserves which provide much of the world's energy needs. Because of this, world superpowers maintain a keen focus on the area and attempt to influence and dominate the region so that energy requirements for economic viability within their own country are sustained.¹ As a result, the Middle East is under constant pressure to satisfy multiple country agendas that may not coincide with the needs or wants of the Middle Eastern people. Furthermore, geographically and from a world perspective, the Middle East is a strategic area because of the Suez Canal, Straits of Hormuz and the Babel Man dab Strait. These are all critical commercial shipping lanes and are vital to any military considerations. The strategic nature of the region coupled with religious nature of the culture creates an environment that prevents challenges to the establishment of a democracy throughout the region in the near term.

The Arab-Israeli conflict further complicates the development of democracy. The conflict is not strictly a Palestinian and Israeli conflict, but a conflict that affects all Arabs in the Middle East. The fact that Israel reflects a Western interest raises suspicion among Arabs about the true nature of democracy². This, in turn, will slow the emergence of democracy in the Middle East and may justify a brand of democracy that truly reflects Middle Eastern interests and may bear little resemblance to a Western democracy.³

Although the Middle East is beginning to transition towards democratic forms of government, there are still the remains of dictatorial and autocratic regimes. Coupled with the tension that already exists in the Middle East due to the conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan and the conflict surrounding Israel, the conditions for further developing democracy will be strained. The existing conflict and tension needs to be resolved before democracy can be more fully accepted by the people of the area.

On the surface, many of the autocratic leaders claim that they are in favor of democratic ideals and forms of government, but they are leery of relinquishing control to the voting public of their regimes.⁴ There are some valid reasons for this. First, many countries are not organized

in a manner to support a democratic form of government.⁵ More importantly, there are security concerns both internal and external to the countries. Many of the nation's police forces and military forces are loyal to the ruling party. If a democracy evolves with different constituencies, there is no guaranty that the police and military forces will align with the emerging ruling parties. In essence the security forces of a nation need to develop a culture that demonstrates commitment to a nation rather than a ruling party. Furthermore, regime populations need to be prepared to assume a participatory role in a democratic form of government. This will require time to educate the population as well as develop the democratic processes that will enable democracy to gain traction.

America has been a driving force in the Middle East with respect to supporting America's national interests. In her effort to do so, America has supported non-democratic regimes and some regimes that were not necessarily well respected in the Middle East. Examples include Gulf State regime, Saudi Arabia, the early Saddam regime, Morocco, Algeria, etc. As a result, many in the Middle East question the motives of the United States and her desire to establish democracy in the Middle East now. Is transitioning to democracy in the best interest of United States, or is it in the interest of the Middle Eastern countries? Democracy development in the Middle East will not easily emerge if the initiation of democracy in the Middle East is perceived as a move by the United States to further her own self-interest. There is also concern that the Global War on Terrorism is really just a mask for establishing Western democracy in the Middle East.⁶ For democracy to be successful in the Middle East, it must reflect Middle Eastern interests and not United States' interests only. Furthermore, democracy must be seen as being beneficial to the people of the Middle East—showing respect to the religious nature of the culture as well as improving conditions for the common man.

A key benchmark for testing democracy in the Middle East is how democracy emerges in Iraq. Will America allow Iraq to develop in its own way as a democracy or will it try to shape democracy into a pro-Western form or regime? For example, different Muslim groups (Muslim Brotherhood, Shia, etc.) are likely to emerge in different Middle Eastern countries as ruling entities in democratic forms of government. If Iraq is perceived as an American puppet, then other countries may not be enticed to move towards democracy and if they do, is America ready to accept Middle Eastern democracies in their own form that may or may not be sympathetic to Western interests, particularly in the early years of a Middle Eastern democracy.

The wants and desires of the countries' populations themselves need to be considered. Do they really want democracy and are they willing to change their ways to establish it and make it work? Changing a political culture is always hard. It is one thing to say that a

democracy is a preferred form of government, but quite another to adjust to its requirements and accept some the risks that go along with it. For example, history has shown that in the first ten years of a new democracy, conflict is likely to occur either externally or internally as the new democracy matures.⁷ The people comprising these new democracies must be committed to the democratic ideal and must be willing to overcome and work through the challenges.

Simply changing the political systems from autocratic rule to democratic rule will not be enough to build a new democracy. The economic, religious, education, media, security and legal systems will all be affected. As a result, it will take time for people and the nation's systems to adjust to the new form of government and free market system that will emerge. Furthermore, existing democratic countries will need to be supportive and patient with the burgeoning new democracies. In my opinion democracy needs good environment like a reasonable economic situation, educated people, and as moderate understanding of religious issues and at the end (minim acknowledge approved from regimes to share power). Given that the Middle Eastern countries have a strong religious base, it is important for Islamic leaders to convince the Middle Eastern people that democracy is good for the country and is not in conflict with moderate Islamic ideals. This type of public support from religious leaders can help build strong support for the establishment of democratic systems and change that will accompany the transition.

Due to the change that will be required and the accompanying time requirements, one cannot expect the Middle Eastern countries to convert quickly to a democratic form of government. There is a concern in the Middle East that American is in a hurry to Democratize the Middle East based upon its aggressive actions in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as its strategy to take pre-emptive action if she chooses to do so.⁸ Moving too quickly can affect the stability of the region as American motives may be perceived as being self-centered and not supportive of the Middle Eastern way of life. It is important that Middle Eastern countries move towards democracy in a logical, steady and controlled manner done on the terms of Middle Eastern countries. Yet, Western democracies will need to be supportive; providing economic, education and technological support to help foster development and change.

The Concept of Democracy from Islamic Perspective

Before continuing further, it is important to gain an understanding of how democracy is perceived by the ordinary people of the Middle East. Democracy, as a secular entity, is unlikely to be favorably received by the vast majority of Middle Easterners, who are devout followers of the Islamic faith.⁹ Traditionally, there is tension among the Muslim countries with respect to the

establishment of a democratic form of government.¹⁰ On the one hand, there are those who believe that democratic rule can co-exist with the religious nature of the Middle Eastern societies; however, on the other hand there are those who believe that the tribal culture of the Middle Eastern countries may not be suitable for democratic rule as too many factions will emerge. The result will be a "fractured" society that cannot effectively unite and there is also the risk that this could impact the cohesion produced by the Muslim faith. Although concerns exist, for the most part, the spirit of democracy, or self rule, is viewed as a positive endeavor so long as it builds up the country and sustains the religious base versus devaluing religion and creating instability.¹¹ Creating this balance will be the challenge as most Western democracies have attempted to maintain a separation of church and state. What this suggests is that as democracy grows in the Middle East, it is not necessarily going to evolve upon a Western template—it will have its own shape or form coupled with stronger religious ties.

Democracy cannot be understood in the Middle East without an understanding of the concept of El Kalafa. El Kalafa dates back to the time of the prophet Mohammed.¹² During his life and the seventy year period that followed the ideal state of El Kalafa existed as a way of life among the people and within the governing bodies. This period of time is viewed as a very special period and is considered the ideal form of government and it is widely recognized as the goal for any new form of government very much in the manner that the U.S. pursued the ideals of "life, liberty and pursuit of happiness". From the Middle Eastern perspective, the defining words governing their form of democracy would likely reflect "fairness, justice, equality, unity and charity".¹³

Achieving the ideal is always at the forefront of the Middle Eastern society, yet following Mohammed's death and his latent influence, the government which was represented by the El Kalafa began to stray from the ideals fostered by the prophet Mohammed. The leaders of El Kalafa began to look inward and use power for their own well being, rather than the well being of their fellow man. Those in power attempted to secure their power by passing on leadership control to family members rather than the most qualified leaders as determined by the members of the Elbia, which represented El Kalafa.¹⁴ As a result, dissatisfaction with how the El Kalafa process was being carried out arose, and many members became disenfranchised and chose to form their own version of El Kalafa leading to the emergence of Tribal and ethnic factions within what were once a unified Islamic body.¹⁵ As we consider the Middle Eastern Islamic body today, we still see the fallout from the early divisions within the Islamic community, where various tribal and ethnic factions exist. Given this current state, the challenge becomes one of

attempting to reunite these tribal and ethnic factions so that the earliest form of El Kalafa is reestablished.

Related to the El Kalafa are the roles of the Elbia and Elshorah. Both of these processes were represented in the early years of the Muslim faith and therefore are considered important and respected processes.¹⁶ The Elbaya'a is the election process for choosing the El Kalifa, while the El Shorah advisory and oversight body to the El Kalifa or Caliphate. The El Shorah performs its role from a religious viewpoint, in that it ensures that the Caliphate is carrying out his duties in accordance with Islamic teachings. Although these processes have religious historical ties, they also represent processes by which a democracy can emerge.

Given the religious nature of the Middle Eastern culture, how might a Middle Eastern democracy be structured? Will there be three or four branches of government? Should a religious branch be added to the executive, legislative and judicial branches to ensure that the Islamic beliefs and law are followed? A simple answer might be yes, but that is probably not the best means. Ideally, the legislative, executive and judicial bodies should all take Islamic beliefs into consideration when carrying out their duties. As such, there should be no need for a separate religious branch. However, to codify the major tenets of the Islamic faith, they should be represented in the constitution or similar document. This does not mean a theocracy will be established, rather it means that a democracy will be established built upon Islamic beliefs.

As one considers democracy in the Middle East, the most important action to consider is to allow it to emerge. It may not be the same brand or shape as Western democracy, but it will be a start. As a general rule, most Middle Easterners fully support the spirit of democracy and will support it as long as it emerges and seeks to unify the whole. This includes allowing some factions that may be considered radical, particularly if they are supported by a majority through a legitimate vote. The world cannot demand democracy in the Middle East, yet denounce what it looks like because a less than pro-Western party legitimately assumes office. For example, the Palestinians recently elected members from the Hamas group. This group is not on favorable terms with the U.S. and other Western countries, yet they have legitimately elected. It is now up to the Hamas and the rest of the world to work out their political differences. It is important that even though significant differences exist, particularly with respect to the status of Israel, that legitimately elected parties be given the opportunity to govern. If this opportunity is not provided, Middle Eastern countries will question the credibility of Western nations and their real intentions with respect to democratic rule and what it represents.

At this point in the history of the Middle East, the question of democracy is an important one and the Middle East is ripe to consider it. Many in the Middle East feel that the autocratic

forms of government that currently and have previously existed have not produced the progress that people expected, especially when compared to some other parts of the Muslim world, for example Malaysia, Pakistan and Indonesia; let alone some of the Western countries.

The question of establishing democracy is not being thwarted by Islamic tenets. The practice of Islam and democracy can coexist. When democracy was initiated in the United States, it was built upon Judeo Christian values. Given the excessive influence of the Church of England, the U.S. decided to include language in the Constitution that provided some separation from church and state, but religion was not eliminated from government, despite what some are led to believe. Clearly, in the early years, religion was important and shaped the values of the American nation.¹⁷ In the Middle East, the approach is really no different with the exception that the Muslim faith is the basis upon which the Middle Eastern form of democracy will be built. As with the American tradition, other faiths would be allowed to exist, but the prevalent religion in the Middle East is Islam, so it is logical to assume that a democratic form of government will be founded on these beliefs. The challenge that exists is whether the rest of the world will be able to accept a democracy in the Middle East founded on Islamic beliefs. Practically speaking, this should not be an issue because Islamic beliefs produce behavior that is more than comparable to other religious behavior.

The Middle East Democracy Challenges

Internally, there are a number of challenges that will create friction in the development of democracy. These items include the state of poverty, state of education, practice of religion, psychological nature of the population and the government. Within the Middle East, the entire income is \$700 billion and is less than the income of the country of Spain. When considering all the Muslim countries, including those outside the Middle East, the entire income is less than France. Poverty in the Middle East is driven by a number of factors that include war, for example, Arab-Israeli conflict, Iran-Iraq war, Morocco-Es Sahara conflict and Syria-Lebanon, to name a few. These have driven up both internal and external debt and have inhibited economic growth.¹⁸ Poor economic policies and political decisions have exacerbated the economic ills. For example, many Middle East countries attempted to sustain government controlled markets instead of free markets and as a result no incentive developed to drive the economy.¹⁹ Government policies with respect to job creation led to difficulties because too often excess jobs were created when sufficient funding was not available to support the program resulting in high unemployment and public disenchantment with the government.²⁰ Disenchant with the government is a prominent factor today and serves as a point of friction as democracy is

considered. In the minds of Middle Easterners, any government is viewed in a suspicious manner. Furthermore, those in power seem to be living in luxury, while the common man struggles to get by. This further aggravates the perception of what government can really do for the people. Day to day people struggle to get by. The economy is not vibrant and many Middle Easterners are unemployed. Given weak economic systems, people do what they need to do to get by and often corruption is a path that emerges as those who hold power and wealth tend to manipulate the poorer population.²¹ As a consequence, social behavior considers this "quid pro quo" approach as normal. This creates cultural behavior that is contrary to the values upon which a democracy is based. Upon implementing a democracy, there will be a strong tendency for the population to "buy off" their politicians in return for favors. Over time and through education this can change, but it may take a generation or two for it to happen. To address the state of poverty in the Middle East, economic and political conditions must improve whether or not a democracy is established. The fact that change is necessary creates an opportunity for democracy; however, it also creates opportunities for other forms of government as well some of which are not preferable. Those who promote democracy do have an opportunity now in the Middle East.

If poverty can be overcome in Middle Eastern countries, there can be a greater chance that democracy will more quickly emerge. Internally, Middle Eastern countries must take action to strengthen their economies, but they are unlikely to accomplish this task without external support from Western democracies. Support may come in the form of investment in Middle Eastern businesses as well as the establishment of business in the Middle East. What is important is that a commitment be made to moving the economies forward. To ensure support is being developed adequately and that precautions are taken against the real risk of corruption, a special government agency or reporting system should be established to regularly monitor the conduct of Middle Eastern business. Perhaps it's time to reinvigorate the role of the Arab League in economic matters trade oversight.²² These actions could ameliorate the conditions of poverty and give democracy a better chance.

As the common man in the Middle East views the billions of dollars the U.S. is spending on the war in Iraq, he may be quick to say, why don't you use that money to economically develop the Middle East instead of fighting a war? This perception suggests that economic support and stimulation may more quickly produce democratic progress. However, from the U.S. perspective, the money spent on the war is a prerequisite for establishing conditions for a lasting democracy. Without a stable Iraq and Afghanistan, the credibility of democracy by Middle Easterners could be questioned. Clearly, one would prefer to see billions of dollars

dedicated to more peaceful economic endeavors, yet without a receptive environment economic support could evaporate. Yet there is a need to recognize that kinetic means are not the only means to generate support for a stable democracy. The U.S. can be effective by seeking non-Kinetic means to build democracy in Iraq and Afghanistan. To do so, the U.S. must quickly reduce the level of fighting in the Iraq and Afghanistan and she should show support for supportive economic nations in the Middle East, such as Egypt.

The lack of a strong education system coupled with a weak economy will provide friction to the establishment of democracy in the Middle East. With the exception of Syria and Israel, the uneducated population defined as those who cannot read or write, approaches 30-45%.²³ The education system is considered weak and is characterized by low attendance, poor educational materials, and limited funding, little to no internet access.²⁴ The education foundation is weak and its approach is considered random as it is not well connected to the Middle East's economic, governing or even religious needs. Furthermore, the overall economic system is weak and does not provide an incentive for the population to pursue education. Excessive government controls and bloated public payrolls stifle individual initiative and tends to solidify the powerbase of ruling political parties. In Egypt, under President Sadat, government controls were lifted in an effort to stimulate economic growth; however, these efforts have not blossomed under President Mubarak.²⁵ Education in the Middle East cannot be improved with only educational reforms. There must be an economic incentive that will cause the population to see the benefit of education. Therefore, educational reforms must be linked with improved economic capacity. Those in power must also implement policies that encourage economic freedom and growth.

Governing methods represented in the Middle East vary widely and include monarchies, interim government due to occupation forces, democracies, republics, a federation and a theocracy. The religious nature of the Middle East creates challenges for governing authorities, particularly under centralized control. Governments tend toward secular rule, disenfranchising large segments of the population who believe religion should not be excluded from government. Religious leaders who step beyond their bounds in government matters are often sent to prison without a trial. Those governments that claim democracy have very tight centralized control and unfairly influence election outcomes through control of the media and outright intimidation. When governments become excessively powerful the oppressed may respond through terrorist acts. The occupied territory in Israel is a good example. Because the oppression exists, a fertile environment is created that ultimately leads to extremist movements.²⁶ There exists a moderate religious element within society, but they are not as influential as the extremists and

often get associated with their misdeeds. This pits moderate religious elements against extremists. Because of their ability to leverage power, extremists are gaining popularity. As groups, such as Hamas emerge, they are likely to reach power through democratic means, but they still may not fully represent the population, particularly the religious moderates, who they represent. So even with an elected Hamas, there are likely to be internal governance challenges down the road; however, there is hope that the more moderate religious segments can mitigate extremist measures.

The control of the media by government further presents problems to moderate Muslims. The media is managed via a secular philosophy.²⁷ The secular media secures control for the government and further disenfranchises the religious moderates. It spreads a philosophy of liberal living that many moderate Muslims do not support and it also provides a vehicle for extremists to exploit because it enables them to relate to the religious moderates on a shared theme. This has the effect of strengthening the extremist philosophy. Because the government exercises excessive control over the media, the media serves no accountability role for society as a whole.²⁸ If corruption exists in the government, it is likely to go unreported. As such, the masses are led to believe that their governments are good and are truly taking care of them as citizens. Yet many on the street are beginning to learn the real truth by other means.

The media will be an obstacle to a democratic form of government until it can be trusted to represent more than the government's perspective. This will be an immense challenge because those in power must be willing to let go of media control. It may be that the early stages of democracy lack objective reporting until independent news organizations can be established free of retribution. One the key first steps may be to initiate this approach with the help of international news organizations and pressure from democracies with free press.

Democracy risks at the current time.

As mentioned earlier in the paper, the Middle East is comprised of various government types. The majority represent monarchies that have exclusive control over their domains. It is unlikely that these governments will voluntarily give up power any time soon in favor of a democratic means of government. Yet there is a need for some type of unifying vision that can better unite Middle Eastern countries regardless of their form of government. Organizations such as OPEC and the Arab League are examples of organizations that represent Middle Eastern interests, but they do not serve as unifying entities such as the North African Union.²⁹ It may be in the interest of the Middle Eastern countries to take note of government emergence in Africa as they attempt to organize on a regional basis despite differing governing means.

Given the number of monarchies that exist in the Middle East, it is no surprise that the populations look to the government for their welfare. Historically, this has been the case. As a general statement, the nature of the population has been one of dependence upon and favor from the government. Under good leadership, this has been an acceptable way of life, but under untrustworthy and corrupt leaders, the masses have had neither representation nor little to fall back on to meet their needs. Again democracy brings challenges. Individual initiative must be fostered and rewarded so that the individual member of society can understand the importance of pursuing their own destiny instead of relying on the government to provide it for them. This too will take time, strong leadership, a supportive job base and economy.

Differing Perceptions Between the Middle East and Western Culture Regarding Democracy

There is hope for democracy in the Middle East over the long term; however, it may not be a model that follows a Western Template. Democracy in the Middle East must account for the wide variance of government types and it must find a unifying theme that draws the Middle East into a unified region. This where risk comes in. Presently, there is a battle raging between extremists, moderates and the West.³⁰ They are each striving to exert control and establish a way of life that represents their interests.

The Future of Democracy in the Middle East

The extremists see a Caliphate as an ultimate goal whereas moderates are observing emerging democracies in countries like Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. Clearly, Palestine also has the world's attention as Hamas steps to the forefront. The question arises if democracies emerge, what will they look like? I posit three options exist. The first is that the democracies with an extremist bent, like Hamas, may take center stage as they effectively organize and meet the needs of the population they represent. The challenge will be whether or not they can effectively compete on the world stage without cutting themselves off from the international environment, ultimately disenfranchising their constituents. The second form will be in the tradition of the moderates like Egypt or Lebanon, where extremist ideologies are not readily accepted, yet problems with corruption within the government are underrepresented and are not well understood by the masses. To avoid gravitating towards extremist ideologies it is important that these democracies demonstrate a better way of life for the population through representative government. The final form, and least likely is the Western form of democracy. This is an option and will serve as a model of democracy in the Middle East, but it the complexities of the Middle East are unlikely to mirror a Western image. The successful establishment of a democracy in Iraq will serve as a benchmark for Gulf State countries in the

future. If it succeeds so might future moderate democracies. It will demonstrate that the multi-ethnic (Sunni, Shia) conflicts can be peacefully resolved and that they can govern in a unified manner. It will also demonstrate that democracy can resolve widespread poverty and bring about an improved quality of life.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Education and the media will be key enablers towards the establishment of democracy. There must be a shift from state controlled means to population controlled means. As media means, such as the internet and television become more prominent, their ability to influence education from the bottom up will tend to energize the masses. Clearly, the extremists understand the power of the media and are attempting to gain influence through their use.³¹ To be successful, the media must show that the moderate lifestyle is a better way.

The role of religion in government is will be a key issue among many. The moderate view is that there is a place of Islamic beliefs. Historically, for democracies including religion has been a challenge; yet this does not mean the Middle East won't succeed. A common religious understanding among all ethnicities and cultures must exist and there must be consideration given to non-Islamic beliefs.

The Middle East must view itself much in the same manner as the European Union. They represent various countries and cultures that have varying standards of living, but yet see the need to organize for the betterment of Europe—economics, security and international influence. For these same reasons, the Middle East should organize as a region. This will help galvanize the Middle East as a region and may foster free market interaction which is conducive to democratic development. And finally, as the Middle East develops the rest of the world should seek ways to assist in promoting democratic values and means. Investing in educational means would be a good starting point.

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²⁹ Zakaria Niel. "Did Arab Fail to achieve historical action to qualify them to the new century entrance" Al Ahram Volume 41193 September 18, 1999. available at <http://www.ahram.org.eg/archive/1999/9/18/OPIN3.HTM>

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